

Traffic – Our Community’s Leading Growth Industry

Schuylkill Township is seeing the end of an era that began with the advent of trailer parks in our township to handle the wave of new families started by GIs returning from World War II. We are now down to our last farm. We have nearly finished a 50 year transition from a rural township to a suburban one, with the last 15 years seeing the most change in terms of number of houses (as luck would have it, the years I’ve lived here). And we weren’t alone. Our neighboring municipalities have “enjoyed” comparable housing booms, with those north, south and west of us still seeing major new development.

Affordable houses? With land selling in our township at \$100,000+ a build-able lot, developers don’t propose starter homes here anymore, not unless they can put in apartments by the hundreds, or houses so close together that residents can reach out and touch a neighbor, even without a phone. And in the interest of space, I won’t get started on our taxes. Oh, the heck with it; I can’t hold back.

Taxes are an interesting challenge. Did you know that residential land uses generally don’t pay their own way? They need farms (we have 1) and businesses (we have a precious few) to subsidize residents’ demand for “government services” like police, schools, garbage pickup, water, sewer, and of course the thing that we all love that delivers or makes these services possible – government. Estimates show that farms use only 20¢ in services for every \$1.00 they generate in tax revenues. Farms are a real bargain!! Businesses are a good thing too. Businesses generally consume only 40¢ to 60¢ for every \$1.00 they generate in tax revenues. A bargain by any measure. So what about residential uses, you know, where we live? Well, residences consume between \$2.00 and \$4.00 in services for every \$1.00 they contribute in tax revenues. That’s right, homes are expensive, and the most expensive are those that we love so much to build and buy here in Chester County..

We now call this form urban sprawl, but naming it doesn’t mean we are controlling it. And its arrival doesn’t mean the end of development. Schuylkill Township is now entering into the next stage, infill development. That’s where developers return to put houses on every untouched build-able lot in the township. The development of the McCardell property (AKA Weinstock) is an example of infill development, as is the four lot subdivision south and west of the corner at Second Avenue and North White Horse Road.

While we have dramatically added to the number of houses in our township (by some 30% in the last 10 years), our self-inflicted traffic pain is minor compared to the combined onslaught we get every day from our neighbors. Of course, our traffic adds to the woes falling on our neighbors between us and the employment centers. But it is our neighbors’ contribution that, when combined with our central location, causes us traffic congestion that borders on gridlock.

So, what is your township government doing about this? Well, I’m glad you asked. (And I hope you are still glad you did after you read this article.)

I bet you thought the township supervisors have enormous if not unlimited powers on local issues, and it was simply a lack of the will to act or a pro-development bias that got our township (and our neighbors) into this pickle. I also bet you thought the township

could condition developers' building of more houses on traffic considerations. Well, if you took those bets, your wallet would be a little thinner.

Unfortunately, the Commonwealth hasn't given townships the tools or the local control to deal with such obviously interlocking issues as development and traffic. They seem to fear that we might cramp developers' style (and their profits) by making them pay the fully burdened costs for the road improvements made necessary by their desire to build as many houses as they can squeeze onto a site. (We might also even "tax" these developers for the other improvements their home building makes necessary, for example, more school classrooms and teachers, more police, more fire fighters and fire trucks (at \$400,000+ a pop!), more sewer capacity, more water treatment facilities, more power generation and, my personal favorite, more government.)

Why, if the Commonwealth wasn't careful, those progress-blocking townships might just screw up builders' sweetheart arrangement in Pennsylvania to the point that investing their attentions on our Boroughs became the preferred alternative. Can you imagine, putting density where the infrastructure exists to support it instead of taking farmland. Why, we might end up with towns being the center of community life instead of strip malls and mega-complexes. People might even be able to work where they live instead of spending precious hours tied up in traffic (wasting personal time, polluting the air and streams that support life, and funding our enemies who abhor our freedoms). Who would want that?

When it comes to fixing traffic, the only thing it seems townships have the power to do is make things worse by ruining what little remaining quality of life remains from our days as a rural township. For example, we have the power to build more roads (at taxpayers' expense). And we can condemn (at taxpayers' expense) whatever residents' land that we need in order to streamline commuters' trips through our area.

And these commuters would be just fine if we did. In fact, commuters' biggest complaint about our township is that we are always in their way. We slow their trips to the office, to school, to shopping. And they view our desire to preserve whatever vestiges of that which brought us here in the first place as just plain selfish. If they had their way, we would four-lane Rte 23. We would three-lane Pothouse Road, and put turn lanes on all approaches to each intersection. We would straighten out Valley Park Road so that it aligns with Pothouse Road (putting in a \$1 million bridge at taxpayers' expense). And if you don't like living in (and paying for) the resulting macadam and concrete wasteland, well then you shouldn't have moved here in the first place.

In case you've not been to a township meeting, and most of you have not, you should know that the township has been pretty clear that we're not interested in paving over our neighborhoods for the convenience of commuters. So what positive steps can we take? Well, how about an old fashion approach? Let's work with our neighbors to understand the bigger picture. Let's see where we agree, and then let's build a plan that will move us from the current mess towards something we can afford, will see in our lifetimes, and doesn't require us to "pave over paradise and put up a parking lot". Well, we have done (and are still doing) just that.

Over the last three years, Schuylkill Township has been busy taking advantage of every opportunity available to us to get a handle on our transportation challenges. The

following gives you a brief summary of our major activities. More on each is available on our Website (www.schuylkilltpw.org). We also discuss these at our monthly board of supervisors meetings (the first Wednesday of the month; see the agenda on our Website and feel free to drop in between 7:30pm and midnight), and they have frequently been reported on in the newspapers serving our community. If you want more info, we could hold another community workshop on traffic. (But we'll need strong evidence of the community's interest. Last June, we scheduled such a workshop, but only two residents showed up! A little embarrassing to have misread our body politic so badly.) Anyway, here's the list:

Transportation Planning (chronological)

- Rte 23 Closed Loop Signal with East Pikeland, Phoenixville, Schuylkill (1999 – 2003?) This study, which took nearly 3 years to get to the design stage, will interconnect and computerize the traffic signals along Rte 23 so they can be dynamically adjusted to optimize traffic flow. The municipalities are paying for the engineering design only. The cost of implementing the design will be paid for by ??.
- Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission's Rte 29 Slip Ramp Citizens Advisory Committee (1999 through 2002) The committee was composed of representatives of stakeholder groups (employers, residents, local and county government, PennDot, PA Tpk, others) and was formed to provide local input to a proposed installation of slip ramp access to the PA Tpk at Rte 29. For Schuylkill Township, the slip ramps will likely generate increased traffic on White Horse Road, Phoenixville Pike (Rte 29) and all local roads north and west of the proposed location. The resulting access will also likely attract further residential and commercial development north of the turnpike (that includes Charlestown and us, folks).
- Phoenixville Area Regional Transportation Study (2000 through 2002) This study is an example of a new approach to transportation planning. The official planning organization for the southern end of the Delaware River basin is known as the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC). This body has traditionally focused their planning efforts at the state or county level. Recently, they have begun making their expertise available to groups of municipalities willing to work as a group. Schuylkill Township and our neighbors are wrapping up this effort, with the report due out at the end of this year. This was just the third time the DVRPC conducted a multi-municipal study.
- Valley Forge National Historical Park Area Transportation Study (2002 -- ?) This study is probably unique in that it includes all levels of government (federal, state, county, municipal), three federal departments (Interior responsible for national parks, etc.), two counties, and four municipalities. The objective is two fold: re-routing through-park traffic and accommodating the new Center for the American Revolution; and linking Valley Forge Park with other contemporaneous sites, such as Independence Hall in Philadelphia.
- Phoenixville Regional Planning Forum (2000 – Ongoing) Although not directly tied to traffic, we have been working with our neighboring municipalities to coordinate our land use, with the potential that we could do this formally as provide by new Commonwealth powers given to regional groups of municipalities.

What the Above Planning Shows

In general, the above all show in different ways that we have not planned well for our automobile-based lifestyle. More ominous, they show that continuing to base our transportation “system” on the automobile has frightening implications for our environment, quality of life, and economy. In short, if we invest billions of dollars in widening, improving, and maintaining existing highways, bridges, and signalization, add “smart” traffic controls but NO NEW ROADS (we don’t have nearly enough money or space), we will be able to maintain our current state of traffic dysfunction for the next 30 years (theoretically). Of course, in the process we will have trashed our communities. Pollution will worsen. We will spend a growing portion of our lives in cars (it is no accident minivans are planning to add microwaves and washer/dryer combos; we will soon spend more time in our cars than in our homes). And if we don’t? Well, in our township, we will see average speed drop to horse and buggy speeds, while pollution worsens dramatically.

So is it too late? Can we do nothing? Well, it may not be too late, but it is late. We may have a slim chance, but it is better than no chance.

Call to Action

All these studies show that if we resist the temptation to focus on the parochial, we will potentially free up funds that can accomplish some very positive improvements. But, if we insist on having it all, we will likely not like what we do get. Congestion, pollution, taxes, an under-performing economy, major new challenges to and burdens on small businesses to name a few. We cannot afford to make local improvements at every congested intersection. We can’t widen roads just so traffic can speed to the next bottleneck. In short, we must coordinate our investments on a multi-municipal basis. We need to work with our neighbors on the improvements we can all agree on, and not on those that we might like, but that merely moves the problem across the township line.

So will we? Stay tuned. The script is being written and the story unfolding right in front of you (perhaps as seen through a windshield). Who needs reality TV?

Lee Ledbetter, Member of the Schuylkill Township Board of Supervisors